

When the User Disappears: Situational Non-Use of Social Technologies

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ABSTRACT

While most research on use and non-use focuses on the adoption or rejection of technology, this paper proposes “situational non-use” as a framework to examine occasional non-use behaviors for established users of social technologies. I introduce the concepts of obfuscation and self-censorship as situational non-use practices and explore them in reflections of ongoing research projects.

Author Keywords

Non-use; social technology; user; reddit; Google Glass

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.3. Group and Organization Interfaces; Asynchronous interaction; Web-based interaction.

INTRODUCTION

In framing the use and non-use of technologies, the ideas of the user and non-user depend on a strong distinction between these two roles. An individual is online or away from keyboard, has an active or inactive profile, plays or quits. For example, Selwyn (2003) describes the difference between use and non-use as an issue of utility, in that people will use or not use depending on if they find practicality for the technology. Even in their overview of types of non-use, Satchell and Dourish (2009) fundamentally conceive of non-use as actively or unintentionally not adopting a technology by a particular population. However, use and non-use are not exclusive to the roles of user and non-user, and it is important to conceive of non-use as situational decisive moments within the context of use as well. In this position paper, I will outline the idea of situational non-use, especially considering behaviors related to boundary regulation, and reflect on current research as well as the potential to design for situational non-use.

SITUATIONAL NON-USE

Situational non-use refers to instances of non-use given some prior use. The non-use can be momentary (high activity to no activity, with a returned increase in activity) or decrease over time (high activity with a prolonged reduction in activity). The non-use can also be the semblance of non-use in some form, whether manifest as a hidden type of use or an othered use (recognized by whoever imagines the user as contrary to any “valid” use or as some form of unexpected or unimagined use). Situational non-use is important, though, because it is a form of non-use that exists only within the discourse of use. Non-use can occur given various factors of use: for example, experiential factors (the user claims, “After a while X became boring”), emotional factors (“Suddenly I was afraid to do Y”), or conditional factors (“At this time, I didn’t want Z to happen”).

Moreover, situational non-use relies on exactly its description: a particular situation in which the non-use occurs (whether a short moment or a longer duration). In other words, it suggests that there are particular circumstances in which the user may find non-use convenient, beneficial, or necessary. Given any situation, therefore, it remains important to keep in mind not only the endogenous factors of non-use (e.g., how a platform provides particular affordances that inspire use in the first place) but also the exogenous factors that might result in non-use (familial, occupational, emotional, abled, and other everyday haphazard barriers to use).

BOUNDARY REGULATION AND NON-USE

One particular aspect of situational non-use exists with respect to an individual’s behaviors given boundary regulation practices. Boundary regulation refers to brokering access to particular parts of information to various individuals (Palen & Dourish 2003; Lampinen et al. 2011; Stutzman & Hartzog 2012). As Altman (1975) describes it, boundary regulation describes “selective control of access to the self” (p. 24), relating levels of disclosure to particular contexts. However, boundary regulation as currently theorized revolves primarily around the maintenance of defined spheres of life (eg., parental, familial, occupational, institutional, etc.). In other words, it

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is uncommon for boundary regulation in the research literature to cover momentary, situational contexts: encountering the unusual in the face of regularity. Theorizing situational non-use allows us to expand the framework of boundary management techniques to include these moments of irregularity in which the individual decides to not use a particular technology given the current circumstances.

Using the framework of situational non-use, we can look at two types of non-use within the context of use that illustrate and deepen our understanding of boundary regulation practices. These issues are *self-censorship* and *obfuscation*.

SELF-CENSORSHIP AND NON-USE

Situational non-use stems from the individual choice to temporarily cease activity with a certain technology. Within the context of boundary regulation, *self-censorship* plays a large role in non-use for particular situations, especially given reactions to particular social contexts. Research has examined similar behaviors within situations involving online social systems like dating sites: for example, Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs (2006) highlight the role that selective self-presentation – choosing to display or not display particular information about oneself – plays in descriptions to other dating site users.

In the initial phases of a recent project, I am examining self-censorship practices (not) using emerging technology, in particular the wearable computing system, Google Glass. Some types of emerging technology challenge the norms of social interactions, and the interpersonal negotiation of comfort, awareness, and understanding around those technologies can impact individuals' use of them. These types of negotiations have been particularly evident in the case of Google Glass, especially considering boundaries around privacy, of the self but especially of others.

In early interviews, Glass wearers have noted various moments in which they decided to not use the device or were actually challenged by others to do so. Personally, some users feel more comfortable around others when not wearing the device: the most notable practice of non-use involves placing the device on top of the wearer's head, so it avoids the face-to-face connection between two people. These moments with others can range from indirect challenges (for example, through some kind of misunderstanding between the wearer and onlooker, and the wearer decides to remove them to make the situation more comfortable for the other individual) or directly (namely, being asked to take off or turn off the device).

While some users have described their occasional non-use as a practical type of non-use – e.g., I have no need for it at home – many instances of situational non-use occur because of factors exogenous to the technology, reinforced through social norms, perceptions, and even popular culture. This last point is particularly relevant, as anecdotes, news articles, and hearsay structure how some encounters

with Glass have prompted onlookers to imagine improbable uses, thus forcing the wearer to dampen worries or fears by not wearing the device.

OBFUSCATION AND NON-USE

Sometimes, a user will want to make a use hidden instead of outright ceasing to use a technology. Sometimes a use can be fashioned into the semblance of a non-use – either literally not able to be traced or hidden amongst other arbitrary traces (such that the use becomes invalidated). Brunton & Nissenbaum (2011¹) call this tactic *obfuscation*, and define it as “producing misleading, false, or ambiguous data to make data gathering less reliable...” (p. 1). While Brunton and Nissenbaum particularly frame their examples as a political orientation and practice, the idea of obfuscation is particularly applicable to theorizing non-use.

Obfuscation allows an individual to still participate. But when we define a user within social technology software as an individual with an account, there are many issues that come along with that. As Satchell and Dourish (2009) argue, the user is discursively constructed, so given a user defined by an account, when the account goes inactive, any basic analysis would view them as not using the platform (namely, no trace data tied to the account in the database). With obfuscation, this “non-use” is still a use, just hidden.

In another recent project, I investigated the phenomenon of “throwaway accounts” on reddit.com. Reddit provides any individual immediate access to the site with only a username, password, and CAPTCHA, so the emergence of temporary, single-use monikers have been adopted: anyone can share personal or controversial information without linking that information to their primary account. The results demonstrated that individuals who had lower perceptions of anonymity were more likely to use these accounts, and female users were significantly more likely to employ them across the site (see Figure 1).

In theorizing “the user,” the strategy of switching arbitrarily between accounts would constitute a non-use of reddit. The primary account becomes inactive (while the unlinked throwaway account is then activated). Of course, it is clear that any individual employing a throwaway account is obviously still using reddit, just in a different – namely, obfuscated – way (ie., the user is no longer using, until you realize they are using with another account). It is therefore important to introduce the theoretical framework of situational non-use in this example, because it allows the researcher to discuss the user as constructed technologically across various self-presentations (rather than from a technical standpoint). Moreover, from a practical standpoint, it is essential for the researcher to understand the contexts of use in order to discover this phenomenon of “non-use” in the first place. For instance, by simply

¹ Noting this paper for inclusion in the workshop's bibliography.

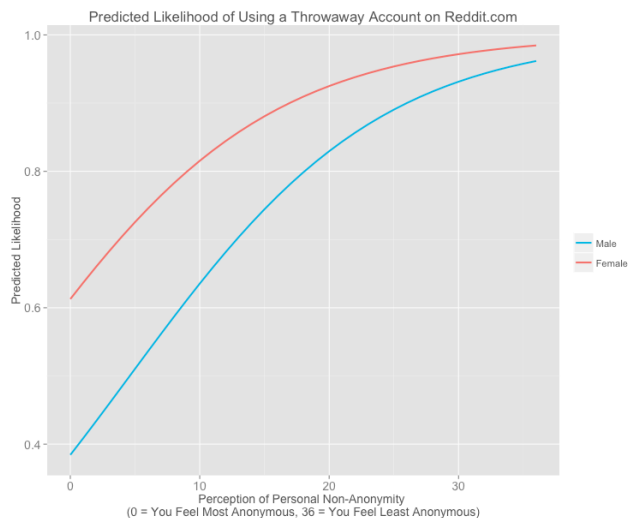


Figure 1. Predicted use of throwaway accounts on reddit.com.

scraping user profiles from reddit’s API, these accounts are near-invisible, because (obviously) they are not explicitly linked.

DESIGNING FOR SITUATIONAL NON-USE

Situational non-use occurs with every technology, but studying these kinds of behaviors remains difficult. Situational non-use evades detection in trace data, unless the phenomena of use becomes apparent to the researcher. Ethnographic methodologies can encounter situational non-use, though interview-based inquiries can only examine them retrospectively.

Is it possible, then, to design for situational non-use? Or will these types of behaviors remain social inflections in our interactions with technology? For instance, throwaway accounts on reddit emerged as a byproduct of reddit’s easy-to-create usernames and individuals’ needs to utilize temporary namespaces distinct from their primary ones. Such an opportunity could be built into particular systems; however, designers must first imagine the non-use and its related social context. That moment of imagination is particularly important: in its most basic form, situational non-use occurs because the user themselves sees the opportunity for a non-use. Many non-uses may not even employ features of the technology in question.

In some forms of non-use (e.g., self-censorship), applications can be designed to allow for automated momentary non-use. For example, Fred Stutzman’s software, *Freedom*², allows an individual to block access to various parts of the internet (to avoid online distractions that “destroy productivity”) for a set period of time. This “being away” from technology constitutes a non-use, but the motivations for the choice and the contexts that

prompted it can only be understood given the original use. Therefore, any design must be able to address particular issues of use and present options for any particular non-use.

The practice of sporadic forms of non-use is an important point in the spectrum of use and non-use, because it helps us point to factors that lead to non-use, both on a design level but also for understanding the social and cultural contexts of technology adoption and maintenance. The concepts of obfuscation and self-censorship lead us to think through the behavioral mechanisms that can make up a “non-use,” while also suggesting circumstantial motivations for particular non-uses. In future research, non-use should be conceived at the level of adoption or refusal, but we should also consider non-use as an option in the spectrum of levels of activity rather than as defined states of a user or non-user.

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² <http://macfreedom.com/>